

Desertion, scandal, and disaster: Augustus on the back foot

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History remembers Augustus as the man who secured power as Rome's first emperor. But he was just eighteen years old when he was posthumously adopted by Julius Caesar to become Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus – or 'Octavian' as we call him today. How did this young man go on to dominate Roman political life for the next 50 years? And how did he seek to control his public reputation? Penny Goodman takes us through three moments when his carefully-crafted image came under threat, as well as the methods he used to protect it.

1. The war with Antony

Within just a few years of Caesar's death, the politics of Rome had been turned upside down. At first, Octavian and Antony came to blows; then they joined forces, taking Lepidus as their ally in a deadly coalition which saw most of Italy purged of the three men's enemies. Cicero was dead, as were Brutus, Cassius, and many more besides. Sextus Pompeius, the only surviving son of Pompey the Great, continued to lead the republican front for a while; however, by 35 B.C. he too was out of the picture. Octavian was already seen by some as having more than his fair share of blood on his hands; he had also climbed his way to the top by a combination of cunning, cruelty, and illegality. But, by the late 30s B.C., it was clear that civil war was brewing between Octavian and his rival Mark Antony, who was famously supported by the Egyptian queen Cleopatra. Octavian knew that Rome was tired of civil war after decades of tension and conflict, so he worked hard to avoid appearing to cause another one.

He argued that Cleopatra had led Antony astray and was controlling his actions, which allowed him to paint the impending conflict as a foreign war against Cleopatra rather than a civil war against Antony. He also presented himself as reluctant to engage in any warfare at all. In his own account of his career, he later wrote that 'the whole of Italy' had sworn an oath of loyalty to him and demanded him as their commander, along with 700 senators and all of the western provinces

(*Res Gestae* 25.2). In other words, he claimed that he only declared war because everyone in Rome, Italy, and the west asked him to.

... and pardoning the past

But Octavian's attempts to claim universal support for his cause must have looked pretty weak in 32 B.C., when both consuls and around 300 senators fled Rome and joined Antony. This revealed the coming conflict for what it was: a civil war, with the Roman aristocracy divided between the two opponents. Octavian's attempts to secure the moral high ground were threatened, but his careful response limited the damage to his position.

He could have condemned the senators, expressing anger or betrayal at their desertion, but this would have revealed that he saw them as his enemies, destroying his attempts to avoid the taint of civil war. Instead, according to Cassius Dio, he claimed to have sent the senators away of his own accord, and added that any others who wanted to join Antony could go in safety. This not only signalled that he bore no malice towards these senators, or Antony, but would also have bolstered the support of those who remained. By showing that he could behave generously towards his opponents, he strengthened his image as a good and honourable man, who could be trusted to respect the senate once the conflict with Antony was over.

2. The Julia scandal

After defeating Antony, Augustus claimed that he would prevent further dissent by restoring traditional Roman virtues. He passed a series of laws concerning marriage and the family, including one which made adultery a criminal offence for the first time. These laws signalled his concern for family life and the raising of legitimate children, and were designed to appeal to the traditionally-minded aristocracy. But they backfired embarrassingly in 2 B.C., when his only child, Julia, was herself accused of adultery. She was supposed to have had multiple lovers, and even prostituted herself in the Forum, right by the speaker's platform where Augustus had originally announced his laws – or so the story goes.

We should be cautious in interpreting what the ancient sources tell us about this event. Many scholars have noted that several of Julia's supposed lovers came from families opposed to Octavian during the civil wars. Indeed, they included the son of Mark Antony, Iullus Antonius, who – according to some sources – was suspected of becoming involved with Julia out of a desire for political power. The real scandal then, may not have been adultery, but the fact that political undesirables were concentrating around Augustus' daughter. Might they have been trying to supplant Tiberius, Julia's husband, and install Iullus Antonius as an alternative heir to Augustus? We cannot be certain. It would have been impossible for anyone except those involved to know the truth, even at the time. Rumours were doubtless rife, while Augustus might have denied the suspicions of conspiracy for fear of looking vulnerable.

... and dealing with disgrace

Certainly, the response focused on the accusations of adultery. Augustus could not appear to grant special treatment to Julia in the face of his own laws, especially when many people had complained that they were too strict and intrusive. He

also needed to quash the suggestion that he was incapable of controlling his own daughter, which might in turn raise questions about his ability to rule the empire. Julia was convicted and exiled to the island of Pandateria, while in Rome Augustus made sure everyone knew how hurt and upset he was. Our sources report that:

He informed the senate of his daughter's fall through a letter read in his absence by a quaestor, and for very shame would meet no one for a long time, and even thought of putting her to death. At all events, when one of her confidantes, a freedwoman called Phoebe, hanged herself at about that same time, he said: 'I would rather have been Phoebe's father.' (Suetonius, *Augustus* 65.2–4)

When Augustus learned what was going on, he gave way to a rage so violent that he could not keep the matter to himself, but went so far as to communicate it to the senate. (Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 55.10.14–16)

Augustus' over-all strategy at this moment of crisis, then, was two-fold. First, he showed no mercy towards Julia. Sacrificing his own daughter to the workings of the law reasserted his control over events and his commitment to his moral legislation. Secondly, he positioned himself as the victim, emphasising how much Julia had let him down. Neither action reflects particularly well on him, certainly in our eyes. But their advantage was that they distracted contemporaries from much more damaging alternatives: concerns about his fitness to rule and his vulnerability to political conspiracies. As for Iullus Antonius, he and other leading figures amongst the accused were put to death: perhaps Augustus' real priority all along.

3. The Varus disaster

Another pillar of Augustus' public image was his reputation as a great military commander: the first leader to subject the whole world to Roman rule – or so he later claimed in the preface to his *Res Gestae* (the huge autobiographical statement he wrote and asked to be inscribed on two bronze pillars attached to his tomb). Yet substantiating this claim required constant campaigning on the frontiers of the empire, and a regular flow of victories and triumphs. But what happened when the news from the frontiers was disastrous? This is what happened in A.D. 9, when three legions were massacred in the Teutoburg forest during an attempt to consolidate Roman control in Germany.

There was no hope of covering up this disaster; it was one of the greatest military losses of antiquity. Almost every family in Rome must have lost, or known someone who had lost, a relative. So Augustus needed to act quickly to protect his reputation as the guarantor of Rome's safety. As with Julia, his basic approach was to blame someone else, while positioning himself as the victim. This time the scapegoat was Varus, commander of the legions, who had conveniently died in the massacre and could not tell his side of the story. Our sources are universal in condemning his stupidity and poor leadership for allowing a local German chieftain, Arminius, to lead his legions into a trap under the pretence of helping them. Indeed, the fact that the event is widely known today as 'the Varus disaster' shows just how successful Augustus was at shifting the blame.

... and coping with the aftermath

Yet our sources record several interesting responses that Augustus made in the face of the Varus disaster. To begin with, there was his allegedly histrionic behaviour, famous from the anecdote that Augustus used to dash his head against a door, crying 'Quintilius Varus, give me back my legions!' Such a dramatic response is automatically recognisable from Julia's adultery scandal. Here, Augustus explicitly blames Varus for the loss, and portrays himself as the injured party. Indeed, it was part of a wider show of traditional Roman mourning behaviour, which included leaving his hair and beard uncut and commemorating the anniversary of the disaster ever afterwards. He was presenting himself as a bereaved father, thus acting out his official role as Father of the Fatherland (*Pater Patriae*). In doing so, however, he also created a sympathetic bond between himself and the many individually bereaved families throughout the city. Who, on hearing how deeply the emperor grieved, could possibly be so insensitive as to blame him for their loss?

Next, Suetonius' report of the event also shows Augustus moving swiftly to preempt any possible unrest and foster hope for the future. He ordered watches day and night throughout Rome, ready to stop any rioting which might threaten his position. In addition, he extended the terms of the governors currently stationed in the provinces, ensuring that experienced hands stayed in place to detect and quash any local unrest. Meanwhile, back at home he vowed to hold special games in honour of Jupiter Optimus Maximus, the chief god of the Romans, if the condition of the state improved. This not only demonstrated that he was taking proper steps to ensure divine favour, but also gave the people something enjoyable to look

forward to. In Suetonius' account there is no doubt about the seriousness of the Teutoburg massacre. He describes it as 'almost fatal', implicitly to both the security of the empire and Augustus' position in power. But his swift and multi-faceted damage limitation programme ensured that he weathered the storm.

Conclusion

Augustus survived these three disasters, and many others, with his reputation and political power intact. His skill in protecting his public image was certainly remarkable, and many a modern politician brought down by comparable events might wish they had paid more attention to his techniques. We should remember, though, that for all his obvious ability to anticipate and seize the public mood, Augustus' damage limitation operations could only have succeeded in a receptive environment. As Octavian, he had launched his career in a world overshadowed by decades of civil war and fears for the security of the Roman state, and attracted a strong base of supporters by presenting himself as the solution to those problems. Then, once he had defeated Antony, his complete political supremacy meant that only those who showed allegiance to Augustus could hope to enjoy successful careers. We know that he had opponents – for example, Iullus Antonius – but the strength of his over-all public image was such that they never succeeded in turning majority opinion against him. When Augustus needed to exercise damage limitation, he did so before a largely sympathetic audience.

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